FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

TRANSLOCATION OF MEXICAN WOLVES THROUGHOUT THE BLUE RANGE WOLF RECOVERY AREA IN ARIZONA AND NEW MEXICO

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Southwestern Regional Office
Mexican Wolf Recovery Program
Albuquerque, New Mexico

March 17, 2000

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) proposes to translocate previously released Mexican gray wolves (*Canis lupis baileyi*) within the Secondary Recovery Zone of the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area (BRWRA) for management purposes. Translocation is the federal action of capturing Mexican wolves previously reintroduced into the Primary Recovery Zone and subsequent relocation to other areas within the BRWRA. The BRWRA is located in east-central Arizona and west-central New Mexico, and encompasses approximately 7,000 square miles of National Forest System lands within the Apache and Gila National Forests. Translocation will be accomplished using various techniques including the use and installation of temporary holding pens for acclimation of wolves to the translocation area, and temporary restrictions to public access and disturbance-causing land uses within a one-mile radius of the holding pens while wolves occupy the site. The February 10, 2000, Environmental Assessment (EA) entitled *Translocation of Mexican Wolves throughout the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in Arizona and New Mexico* addressed the anticipated social, economic, and environmental impacts of the proposed action (Alternative A), one translocation alternative (Alternative B), and the no action alternative (Alternative C).

Pursuant to 40 CFR 1508.20 and 1508.28, the EA is tiered to the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) issued in 1996 by the FWS. The EIS on the *Reintroduction of the Mexican Gray Wolf within its Historic Range in the Southwestern United States* analyzed all anticipated environmental effects due to the presence of 100 wolves throughout the entire BRWRA. Direct release of wolves from captivity was authorized only for the Primary Recovery Zone in the southern portion of the Apache National Forest, entirely within Arizona. Wolves released in the Primary Recovery Zone are allowed to disperse throughout the entire BRWRA, including the Apache National Forest, and Gila National Forest in New Mexico. A federal rule, under the authority of section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, as amended, designated the *Establishment of a Nonessential Experimental Population of the Mexican Gray Wolf in Arizona and New Mexico* (63 FR 1752; January 12, 1998) (50 CFR 17.84(k)) which provides for administrative and management flexibility under the ESA by relaxing prohibitions on take, and allowing for active management of wolves, including translocation of previously released wolves throughout the entire BRWRA for management purposes.

Implementation: The FWS intends to implement this action as soon as possible following a related decision by the U.S. Forest Service, Gila National Forest, Wilderness Ranger District, on the issuance of a special use permit for the installation and use of temporary holding pens. Four potential translocation sites within the Gila Wilderness Area have been proposed to the Forest Service for site-specific analysis.

Analysis of Alternatives: The FWS has analyzed three alternative actions in the EA: 1) Alternative A (Preferred Action) -- Translocation of Wolves Throughout the BRWRA with Temporary Public Access and Land Use Restrictions at Pen Sites; 2) Alternative B -- Translocation of Wolves Throughout the BRWRA Using Only Hard Release Techniques (no pens, no closures); and 3) Alternative C (No Action) – No Wolves Would Be Translocated Into the Secondary Recovery Zone.

Review of the impact assessment completed for the EIS, analysis of actual impacts from wolves previously released in the Primary Recovery Zone of the BRWRA, and consideration of all new information, demonstrates that the expected environmental and socio-economic impacts associated with the translocation of wolves for management purposes within the Secondary Recovery Zone is fully within the range of impacts revealed in the EIS for the BRWRA, and consistent with the management provisions authorized in the nonessential experimental population rule. No significant site-specific impacts have been identified due to the presence of wolves.

Attaining a population of approximately 100 Mexican wolves within the BRWRA is the explicit recovery goal for the BRWRA and the implementation objective of FWS and cooperating agencies. Translocation of wolves into the Secondary Recovery Zone for management purposes (Alternatives A and B) has the potential to achieve the recovery goal more efficiently, and reduce some of the impacts associated with the wolf reintroduction project. With the management flexibility afforded through translocation, FWS can address wolf management conflicts as they arise. The Secondary Recovery Zone provides many more sites for translocation where potential wolf management conflicts can be minimized than are available within only the Primary Recovery Zone. For example, wolves which have been involved in livestock depredations may be moved to the Gila Wilderness within the Secondary Recovery Zone where there is an extensive area without permitted livestock use. These translocations are expected to reduce depredation events and the related impacts to ranching operations. With the management option to translocate wolves anywhere within the BRWRA, other management situations may be resolved (e.g., replacement of lost mates), there may be fewer wolves killed in conflict situations, and fewer wolves which need to be returned to captivity if conflicts with those wolves cannot be resolved. The net result of translocation may be an increase in the rate of wolf dispersal throughout the BRWRA and improved probability that the wolf population goal for the entire BRWRA may be reached. However, Alternative A, allowing for the use of acclimation pens and temporary land-use restrictions, will likely achieve this result sooner than Alternative B.

Public access restrictions at pen sites will occur as necessary for the protection of wolves under Alternative A only, and will remain consistent with the provisions of the EIS and nonessential experimental population rule. Restrictions will be temporary, and will be applied in such a way as to have limited impact on land use.

Site-specific analysis of the environmental effects of holding pens and associated activities will be conducted by the Forest Service. Any potential impacts are limited by the application of mitigation measures listed below. If there are any impacts that cannot be mitigated to acceptable levels (as defined by the mitigation criteria), consideration of those sites will be abandoned or additional environmental analysis will be completed.

Selected Alternative: The preferred alternative (Alternative A) was selected as the proposed action because translocation of wolves within the Secondary Recovery Zone provides management flexibility which is expected to reduce some environmental impacts while increasing the probability of successful recovery of the Mexican wolf. The use of acclimation pens and temporary land use restrictions in the vicinity of the pens improves the potential fidelity of the wolves to the translocation area and provides the wolves protection from disturbances. The analysis of the selected alternative (Alternative A) did not reveal any significant changes or additions to the impacts addressed in the EIS.

Effects of the Selected Alternative: Implementation of Alternative A is expected to result in the following environmental, social, and economic effects:

Adverse Effects:

1. Wolves will prey on big-game species (elk and deer).

2. Wolves will likely depredate some livestock.

3. The presence of wolves poses possible risks to free-ranging pets.

4. Temporary land use restrictions within a one-mile radius of the acclimation pens will be imposed as necessary, restricting certain activities, including recreational access.

Beneficial Effects:

1. Translocation provides an additional management option to more quickly assist in resolving potential conflicts.

2. Increased opportunities for translocation of wolves may result in a net reduction of livestock depredation and conflicts with pets within the BRWRA. The Secondary Recovery Zone contains extensive area where livestock is limited either geographically or seasonally, and human habitation with associated pets is also limited.

3. Improved wolf survival is anticipated because of increased opportunities to translocate wolves away from areas of high levels of human activity (e.g., urban areas, recreation areas) where there is an increased risk of wolf mortality (e.g., shootings, vehicular collisions).

4. The need for repeated capture and management of wolves should be minimized with the ability to translocate wolves throughout the BRWRA

5. Translocation provides opportunities to achieve wolf recovery with increased efficiency; less time and reduced cost. Some level of cost-savings is also anticipated in association with captive management of wolves because of the reduced number of animals expected to be permanently removed from the wild due to management conflicts.

Mitigation: Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects have been incorporated into the proposal. These measures include provisions to ameliorate effects associated with the selection of the translocation area and holding pen site.

Translocation area selection criteria:

1. Translocation site selection will be determined in coordination with the Forest Service, state wildlife agency, and interagency wolf field team. The primary objectives in the selection of these areas are to provide a temporary, safe, secure environment for wolves during acclimation, and to give wolves the best opportunity for success (minimize potential for conflicts) upon release.

2. Translocation areas will be located adequate distances from recovery area boundaries, human habitations, and active wolf pack territories.

3. Translocation areas, holding pen sites, and associated facilities will be located away from human habitations, heavily-used trails, recreation areas, and roads by geographic distance and appropriate timing to minimize impacts to National Forest users. The Forest Service and FWS will coordinate with Forest permittees as necessary to minimize potential conflicts and restrictions on activities such as livestock grazing, timber harvest, or commercial recreational use occurring in the area *(also applies as mitigation for holding pen site selection criteria)*.

4. Translocation areas and holding pen sites will be placed in areas where minimum public access and land use restrictions are needed to avoid disturbance of the wolves. Public information efforts will be made to advise people of any temporary, limited restrictions on public access and disturbance-causing land uses associated with the pen locations *(also applies as mitigation for holding pen site selection criteria)*.

5. Translocation areas and pen sites will be located in areas which minimize exposure of wolves to humans, livestock, and disturbance-causing land uses during acclimation and upon release *(also applies as mitigation for holding pen site selection criteria)*.

Holding pen site selection criteria:

1. Pen sites will be selected to minimize exposure of wolves to livestock during acclimation and upon release. Pens will be located in areas withdrawn from livestock grazing or where wolf releases can be accomplished outside of seasonal livestock use periods, and within areas where there are adequate native prey. For pen sites in pastures within active livestock allotments, wolves will be released at least 30 days prior to livestock entry into that particular pasture.

2. Construction or occupation of pens or field crew camps near important habitat use features such as nests, roost areas, and stream beds will be avoided to minimize impacts to other species listed under the ESA. If a pen may affect a listed species, the New Mexico Ecological Services Office or Arizona Ecological Services Office, as appropriate, will be consulted.

3. No temporary structures or occupying field crew camps will be installed on archaeological sites.

4. Forest Service personnel will assist the field crew in determining the exact location of the pens to assure that the pens are not placed where there will be adverse impacts on sensitive resources. The pen sites will not be visible from major trails, or if in designated Wilderness Areas, will not degrade wilderness values.

5. For pen sites within designated Wilderness Areas, Primitive Areas, or Roadless Areas, only "hard release" or "soft release" techniques using flexible nylon fencing or similar material will be employed (i.e., chain-link fencing will not be used). Pens will not be visible from major trails. In Wilderness Areas, pens sites will be occupied by wolves for no more than 30 days. Only "leave no trace" camping techniques will be used by the field crew, and aerial telemetry flights will be conducted at an elevation of at least 2,000 feet above the ground.

Wetlands and Flood Plains: The project is not expected to have a significant effect on wetlands or flood plains, pursuant to Executive Orders 11990 and 11988, because the presence of wolves will not impact these areas, and acclimation pens will not be placed within wetlands or flood plains.

Human Environment: The project will not have a significant effect on the human environment above that analyzed in the EIS to which this action is tiered. Management of wolves within the Primary Recovery Zone has resulted in some livestock losses and predation on big-game species

within the parameters set forth in the EIS. Management flexibility provided through translocation is expected to result in a reduction of these impacts. None-the-less, any conflict will continue to be addressed under the existing Mexican wolf nonessential experimental population rule and management plans.

Coordination: The project proposal has been thoroughly coordinated with interested and affected parties. On January 14, 2000, FWS issued a letter of intent to prepare the EA, addressing the effects of Mexican wolf translocation into the Secondary Recovery Zone of the BRWRA. This letter was distributed to approximately 1,000 interested members of the public, including individuals and organizations. News releases were also distributed requesting input on wolf translocation into the Secondary Recovery Zone of the BRWRA. In addition, FWS and Forest Service personnel personally contacted many local ranchers, outfitter/guides, and neighboring land owners, and met with several special interest organizations. Scoping comments on the proposed action were accepted through February 4, 2000. The proposed project was also discussed at the Mexican Wolf Interagency Management Team meetings, whose membership includes representatives from tribal governments, county governments, and federal and state agencies. The request for scoping comments resulted in a total of 728 responses, representing 691 individuals and 37 organizations.

The EA was completed on February 10, 2000. It was mailed to 718 persons, and made available to others at public hearings and from Gila National Forest offices. Two public hearings were conducted, one each in Reserve and Silver City, New Mexico. These hearings were attended by more than 850 people. Oral testimony was heard from 127 persons; there was insufficient time at the public hearing for 87 people who requested the opportunity to speak to provide oral testimony. Comments on the EA we accepted through March 15, 2000, and 9,023 comments were received. All comments were carefully considered for new infomation or issues not previously considered within the EIS. A total of 37 separate issues were identified from the comments. Many of these issues were outside the scope of the EA; others did not present new information or identify issues which would suggest the original analysis presented in the EIS was lacking or otherwise not accurate. Copies of all comments are on file within the Administrative Record maintained by the Mexican Wolf Recovery Program at FWS Southwestern Regional Office, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

For clarification purposes, certain issues (in addition to those addressed above) are brought forward here:

> Issue: Sampling protocols used in public opinion surveys (specifically Duda and Young 1995) reported in the EIS have been criticized. Response: These reports were referenced in the EIS as part of the information base available pertaining to wolf recovery in New Mexico. Though these reports have been included in the EIS, the analysis within the EIS and subsequent decisions were not based on the results of those reports.

Issue: The Mexican wolves being released have been criticized as being "less than wild," and as such, pose a greater risk to public safety than truly wild wolves. Response: The FWS acknowledges that only captive-reared animals are available for reintroduction. However, all release candidate wolves are raised and held in facilities where interaction with humans is absolutely minimized. Although captive, these wolves are not domesticated or imprinted on humans. When these wolves are handled for physical examinations or for transfer, the experience is one of stress and discomfort to the wolves. Many of the animals used in other wolf reintroduction programs (e.g., red wolf) have been handled in similar fashion. Hand-reared, domesticated wolves and wolf-dog hybrids have attacked and killed humans in captive situations. However, wild wolf attacks on humans in North America are extremely rare and there are no verified human fatalities. No free-ranging, captive-reared red wolf or Mexican wolf has been involved in an attack on a human.

Issue: The EA reported in error that there is no active livestock grazing permit over a large area of the Gila Wilderness. Response: This statement in the EA was in error. Though there are no cattle grazing permits in this area, there is a special use permit to allow an outfitter/guide service to graze up to 40 head of horses in the vicinity of two proposed translocation sites. These horses are not allowed to breed or foal while on these Forest Service lands, and the use of the various release sites will be accomplished in coordination with the Forest Service and permittee in order to minimize any potential interactions between horses and wolves.

Agencies participating in the Mexican wolf interagency field team and/or directly involved in the analysis and preparation of the EA included:

FWS
U.S. Forest Service
    Gila National Forest
    Southwest Regional Office
New Mexico Department of Game and Fish
Arizona Game and Fish Department
U.S. Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Wildlife Services

Conclusion: Therefore, it is my determination that the proposal to translocate previously released Mexican gray wolves within the Secondary Recovery Zone of the BRWRA for management purposes does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of Section 102 (2) (c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required. An environmental assessment has been prepared in support of the finding and is available upon request from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Mexican Wolf Recovery Program, P.O. Box 1306, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 87103 (505 - 248-6920).

References:

Environmental Assessment for the *Translocation of Mexican Wolves Throughout the Blue Range Wolf Recovery Area in Arizona and New Mexico.* February 10, 2000.

Final Rule: *Establishment of a Nonessential Experimental Population of the Mexican Gray Wolf in Arizona and New Mexico*. 63 FR 1752; January 12, 1998. 50 CFR 17.84(k).

Notice of Record of Decision and Statement of Findings. Signed by the Secretary of the Interior, Secretary of Agriculture, and Deputy Assistant Secretary of the Army. March, 1997.

Environmental Impact Statement on the *Reintroduction of the Mexican Gray Wolf within its Historic Range in the Southwestern United States*. November, 1996.

Duda and Young. *New Mexico Resident's Opinions Toward Mexican Wolf Reintroduction.* Report for the League of Women Voters of New Mexico. Prepared by Responsive Management. Harrisburg, Virginia. 1995.

_____ _____

Regional Director Date